

Supplement to *British Book News*

ARNOLD BENNETT

By FRANK SWINNERTON

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In his fine appreciation of what Staffordshire stands for in relation to Great Britain as a whole, particularly since the coming of the Industrial era towards the end of the eighteenth century, Mr. Swinnerton says truly that her men are 'respected as craftsmen all over the world'. The remark applies as truly to Arnold Bennett as for instance, to the master-potter, Josiah Wedgwood. Bennett was a craftsman first, last, and all the time. He was recognized as such in his lifetime, and he left a body of work behind him, some of which has qualities of permanence.

No one is better qualified than Mr. Swinnerton to write of Bennett. He knew him intimately over many years, admired him keenly but not uncritically, and brings to his present assessment wide experience of letters, and great acumen. No one has yet written better about Bennett, and his essay will stimulate the ever-continuing process of re-estimating a man who in his own lifetime (1867-1931) commanded as much attention as any contemporary.

Mr. Swinnerton writes as one with a dual reputation as novelist and critic. Perhaps his own best known story is his exquisite *Nocturne*, followed closely in general favour by *The Georgian House*. His critical studies of Gissing, Stevenson and above all of the whole 'Georgian Literary Scene' in a volume with that title have shown consistently sound judgement, and an uncommon sense of proportion.

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GENERAL EDITOR
T. O. Beachcroft



photograph by Kollar

ARNOLD BENNETT
from a plaster cast, 1930, by Jo Davidson

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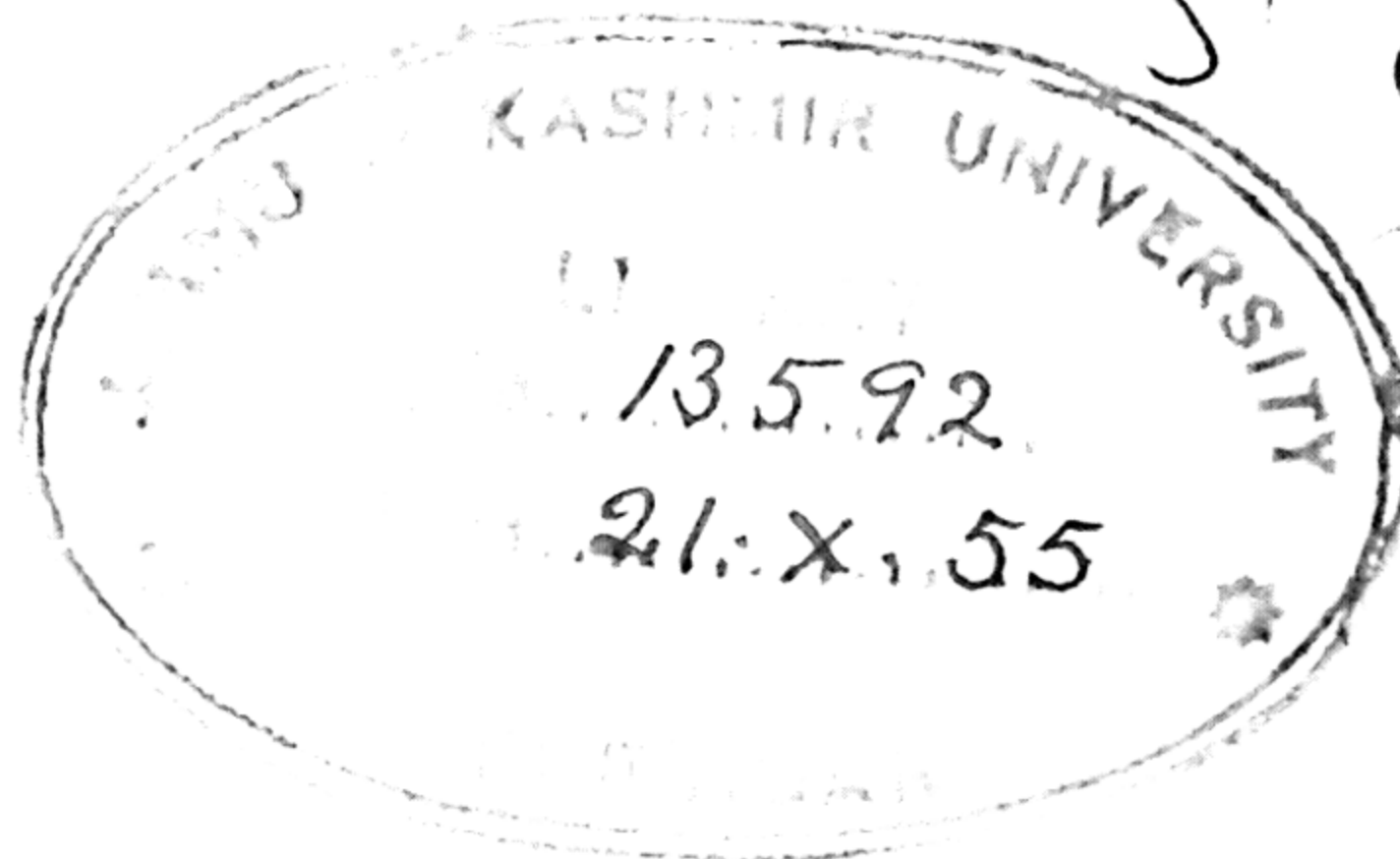


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ARNOLD BENNETT

IF, taking a map of England, you were to look at the very centre of it, you would find your eyes resting upon some part of the county of Staffordshire. And if this physical fact should lead you to imagine that the natives of Staffordshire ought to be more typically and peculiarly English than the natives of any other district in the British Isles, you would be warmly supported by Staffordshire men everywhere. It has been their belief, in fact, for centuries past, that they have more English common sense than all the rest of the population put together.

The belief is as old as county pride, and it arises from two circumstances. The first of these was early isolation from the rest of the community ; the second, great industrial wealth and distinction in the nineteenth century. As to the first, there was formerly little communication between Staffordshire and London or the sea ; and although at the beginning of the eighteenth century Daniel Defoe said its men were famous as fine runners, and at Penkridge, near Stafford, found them impressive horse-dealers, he remarked no industries in the county except the brewing of good ale at Tamworth and a recent local increase in the clothing trade. English roads were then extremely primitive ; national business was done in the great ports, such as Bristol ; most of the population lived south and west of London. Even in agriculture Staffordshire was remote. As late as 1796 a candid native, who had travelled, lamented that ' to the eye of the intelligent agricultural stranger it would convey the idea of a county just emerging from a state of barbarism '.

But as the eighteenth century ended Staffordshire began to move towards its later prosperity. Its water-logged mines were pumped and good coal was obtained. Iron was worked. And Josiah Wedgwood developed what had been a small village industry into a great craft and the most celebrated source of the county's immense wealth.

Staffordshire men, inheriting the pride of their ancestors in isolation, were no longer members of a sparse and unrecognized community. They were respected as craftsmen all over the world. The villages where pottery was made became towns—Burslem, Hanley, Stoke, Tunstall, and Longton—and sent their wares by every new means of transport to centres from which they travelled across the oceans. Pride of craft, pride in uncommon wisdom, pride in prosperity gave the whole county an assurance of being and making the best there was in England.

Pride was justified. Staffordshire had in fact produced one man whose predominant characteristics were those of the whole race. He was born in the south of the county, in the city of Lichfield; and his name was Samuel Johnson. He was deeply religious, a hater of cant, a robust, downright critic, a hypochondriac, a strong Tory in politics and an ardent liberal in practice, and a man of the greatest practical sanity of mind. Contemporaries such as Horace Walpole and Thomas Gray, who were abnormally fastidious, found fault with his roughness and independence. Gray called him 'Ursa Major', while Walpole—very truly, and more admiringly than he intended—said he was 'the representative in epitome of all the contradictions in human nature'. But they both thus testified to the fact that he was a great and typical Englishman; and this, despite the reservations and re-interpretations of succeeding ages, is what Johnson has been considered ever since his death in 1784.

Johnson was the most stupendous of all the sons of Staffordshire. As, however, for more than fifty years, he lived and worked and triumphantly browbeat his conversational opponents in London, he is often taken for a true-born Cockney; and therefore Staffordshire has had as little general credit for him as for another classic English writer, Izaak Walton, who was born in Stafford itself. Only the work and fame of the original Josiah Wedgwood, and the anonymous work of other fine craftsmen, have saved the county from apparent bankruptcy in the arts. It

produced pottery, coal, and iron ; but in every other respect remained entirely undistinguished.

A dreary county, men thought, passing through it to the more eminent beauties of north or south ; black, inhuman, uninteresting. The fame of its pottery was of course tremendous. But the potter's craft had made it merely repulsive. So much was shown by George Moore in *A Mummer's Wife*, when he pictured the outlook from Hanley as

one of those terrible cauldrons in which man melts and moulds this huge age of iron. Of what did this valley consist ? Of black plains that the sunlight could not change in colour ; of patches of grass, hard and metallic in hue ; of tanks of water glittering like blades of steel ; of gigantic smoke-clouds rolling over the stems of a thousand factory chimneys. . . .

Kate stood on the side of a steep declivity. Through its worn sides black cinders protruded, and the ruins of deserted collieries stood close at hand. . . . So black was everything that even the spire of the church remained a silhouette in the liquid sunlight that was poured as out of a diamond vase from the long pale space of sky which rose behind the hills.

That was Staffordshire as a stranger saw it in 1885. Who would have supposed that it could produce an artist who, without falsification, would give the county in the eyes of the world a new air of life, beauty, and romance ? Yet it was within sight of such a scene as this that, on 27 May 1867, Enoch Arnold Bennett was born ; and it was from youth spent in these surroundings that he drew the inspiration for the whole of his best work. How was it done ? I shall try to explain.

The place of his birth was 90 Hope Street, Hanley. Arnold was the eldest of six children, and his father, Enoch Bennett, before becoming a solicitor, had been a potter and a schoolmaster. He also carried on, in a part of the house in Hope Street, the business of a pawnbroker. The Bennetts were strict Wesleyan Methodists ; and although among their neighbours they were uncommonly musical,

artistic, and well-read, they belonged to the Hanley described by Moore and were intensely typical of the town's population. They were, as Arnold Bennett later said, 'of the North, outwardly brusque, stoical, undemonstrative, scornful of the impulsive'. That was what all men could see. But Bennett added something else too. Having dwelt upon the stoicism of his people, he added with even deeper truth that they were 'inwardly all sentiment and crushed tenderness'. But lest this should be misunderstood he insisted that 'We are of the North, incredibly, ruthlessly independent, and eager to say "Damn you" to all the deities at the least hint of condescension'.

This was the man who for the first time made five continents aware of Staffordshire as Staffordshire saw itself. The county should be grateful to Arnold Bennett for doing it an immense service. If little gratitude was shown during his lifetime, that is in accordance with the Staffordshire character, which exhibits a cool unreadiness to display—perhaps even to feel—deep emotion, and which sternly checks all such display in others. When Arnold Bennett, as a man of celebrated middle-age, allowed himself any exuberance of humour in his mother's presence, she would calmly suppress him with the voice of all Staffordshire. 'Nay, Enoch', she would quietly say, deliberately using his discarded first name. It was enough. He was at once restored to the state of being 'outwardly brusque, stoical, undemonstrative, scornful of the impulsive'.

Arnold, educated at the Middle School, Newcastle-under-Lyme, was well grounded in Latin, and he learnt a good deal of grammatically accurate French. He later attended a local art school, contributed some cheeky paragraphs to the town's newspaper, tried his hand at some fiction in the manners of his two favourite authors, who were Ouida and Zola; and at the age of eighteen entered his father's office to finish preparing for matriculation at London University and to study for a law degree which he never took. When he was twenty-one he left Hanley and became

a clerk in the office of some London solicitors. He never again lived in his native town.

Working in the same London office as himself was another young man who had a passion for book-collecting and who talked idiomatic French with ease. Arnold Bennett, shy, diffident, but so proud that his shyness would not have been guessed if he had not suffered from a formidable stammer, derived the greatest possible help from this young man's friendship. The two not only 'collected'; they discovered books. It is true that Bennett said he remembered having studied only one book at this time, and it is also true that he described his self-esteem, then and afterwards, as 'vigorous'. But his self-esteem was largely for public consumption, and while there were many books which he had not read he was more candid about his omissions than most men dare to be. In any case he was not a student, but an observer of life and human nature.

At this time he made other friends; and it was taken for granted by them, for they were artists, that he would one day become a writer. He became a writer. At first his efforts were slight, the humorous condensation into a couple of thousand words of a long novel by, I believe, James Payn, and some popular articles about legal details; but his experiences of free-lance journalism were not happy, and he was soon glad to obtain the sub-editorship of a weekly journal called *Woman*. He became editor of this journal, wrote a short story which, rejected by *Tit-Bits*, was accepted by *The Yellow Book*; and resolved to write a novel. It was to be 'unlike all English novels except those of one author' (George Moore); and, 'life being grey, sinister, and melancholy, the novel must be grey, sinister, and melancholy'. His own life was by no means, he later remarked, grey or sinister, or melancholy; but he was in the grip of French realism, and the fact that Moore had set the scene of *A Mummer's Wife* in the Potteries had a great effect upon Bennett's mind. It proved in the end to be crucial.

This first novel, finally entitled *A Man from the North*,

was published in 1898 by John Lane, upon the recommendation of John Buchan, at three shillings and sixpence. It was not a great success ; but it was favourably reviewed and it set the key for his subsequent realistic novels. Moreover, Bennett added to his editorial work the composition of reviews and critical articles for *The Academy*, which was the liveliest literary periodical of those days ; and he began for fun, and as the result of a boast, to write the sensational serial stories, such as *The Grand Babylon Hotel*, which have been called ' pot-boilers ' but which were a necessary satisfaction of Bennett's still suppressed romanticism. There was no scope for this romanticism in his earliest realistic work ; and Bennett, never one to cosset his reputation, did in fact tremendously enjoy the composition of such books.

Realism, however, was not abandoned. *A Mummer's Wife* had impressed him very much with its power and its Staffordshire setting ; and he had seen how well fitted he was by experience to become the historian of life in the Potteries. Acquaintance with Eden Phillpotts, whose Dartmoor novels (rather than the Wessex novels of Hardy, which he afterwards admired so greatly) revealed the professional value of a regional setting, may likewise have had its influence. And so *Anna of the Five Towns*, which it had taken him five years to write, was finished in 1901, in time to be published in book form almost simultaneously with *The Grand Babylon Hotel*.

Anna of the Five Towns was for long Bennett's most ambitious book ; and it seems to me most interesting to contrast the description it contains of industrial Staffordshire with the one by George Moore which I quoted earlier. Besides remarking that Bennett varied the names of the Five Towns for his own reasons, I should like especially to draw attention to his emphasis, which is so characteristic, on the beauty and the romance of what Moore had eyed with repugnance :

Bursley, the ancient home of the potter, has an antiquity of a thousand years. It lies towards the north end of an extensive valley, which must have been one of the fairest spots in Alfred's

England, but which is now defaced by the activities of a quarter of a million of people. Five contiguous towns—Turnhill, Bursley, Hanbridge, Knype, and Longshaw—united by a single winding thoroughfare some eight miles in length, have inundated the valley like a succession of great lakes. Of these five Bursley is the mother, but Hanbridge is the largest. They are mean and forbidding of aspect—sombre, hard-featured, uncouth ; and the vaporous poison of their ovens and chimneys has soiled and shrivelled the surrounding country till there is no village lane within a league but what offers a gaunt and ludicrous travesty of rural charms. Nothing could be more prosaic than the huddled, red-brown streets ; nothing more seemingly remote from romance. Yet be it said that romance is even here—the romance which, for those who have an eye to perceive it, ever dwells amid the seats of industrial manufacture, softening the coarseness, transfiguring the squalor, of these mighty alchemic operations. Look down into the valley from this terrace-height, . . . embrace the whole smoke-girt amphitheatre in a glance, and it may be that you will suddenly comprehend the secret and superb significance of the vast Doing which goes forward below. Because they seldom think, the townsmen take shame when indicted for having disfigured half a county in order to live. They have not understood that this disfigurement is merely an episode in the unending warfare of man and nature.

You will see from these phrases that Bennett already half-consciously indicated the difference of his own attitude from that of previous English realists such as Gissing, and from that of George Moore. Though the difference was no more than indicated, though he still saw the novelist's art through the eyes of Moore and the brothers de Goncourt, he showed that, for him, realism must be coloured with his own temperamental humanity. It was not enough for him to see and record, or, as Gissing did, to arraign ; he must, because that was his nature, see as a god, and record as one who looked, not sentimentally, but with compassion, for what is good or tolerable in mankind. ' Essential characteristic of the really great novelist : a Christ-like, all-embracing compassion ', he had already noted in his Journal. This remained throughout life his aim as a man.

But at the time he wrote *Anna of the Five Towns* he was still young, actively curious about everything he had not experienced, and decidedly ambitious. The stammer was his great handicap ; otherwise he could dissemble his fears, boast, be downright as Samuel Johnson was downright, and, to his secret surprise, impress others as a man of destined success. He had resigned the editorship of *Woman* in 1900, retired to Bedfordshire to live with his mother and sister, and become both a publisher's reader and a man of letters. But after the publication of *Anna of the Five Towns* and *The Grand Babylon Hotel*, having decided that he could make a living by writing novels of three kinds—realistic, sensational, and humorous,—short stories, articles, and plays, he decided that it was his duty as a good realist to do what George Moore had done and go to live in Paris, the home of modern realism.

He lived in Paris or Fontainebleau for the next ten years, fell in love with an American girl, married a Frenchwoman, matured, wrote all the kinds of work he had planned to write, did in fact far too many things less well than he might have done them, and was inspired to write the novel which is regarded as his masterpiece. When he returned to England to live it was as one of the three leading English writers of fiction, and his reputation was colossal.

The masterpiece was called *The Old Wives' Tale*. The first notion for it came to him in 1903, when he went out to dine alone in his usual cheap Parisian restaurant. He discovered that

a middle-aged woman, inordinately stout and with pendent cheeks, had taken the seat opposite to my prescriptive seat. I hesitated, as there were plenty of empty places, but my waitress requested me to take my usual chair. I did so, and immediately thought : ' With *that* thing opposite to me my dinner will be spoilt ! ' But the woman was evidently also cross at my filling up her table, and she went away, picking up all her belongings, to another part of the restaurant, breathing hard. Then she abandoned her second choice for a third one. My waitress was scornful and angry at this desertion, but laughing

also. Soon all the waitresses were privately laughing at the goings-on of the fat woman, who was being served by the most beautiful waitress I have ever seen in any Duval. The fat woman was clearly a crotchet, a *maniaque*, a woman who lived much alone. Her cloak (she displayed on taking it off a simply awful light puce flannel dress) and her parcels were continually the object of her attention and she was always arguing with her waitress. And the whole restaurant secretly made a butt of her. She was repulsive ; no one could like her or sympathize with her. But I thought—she has been young and slim once. And I immediately thought of a long 10 or 15 thousand words short story, *The History of Two Old Women*. I gave this woman a sister, fat as herself. And the first chapter would be in the restaurant (both sisters) something like to-night—and written rather cruelly. Then I would go back to the infancy of these two, and sketch it all. One should have lived ordinarily, married prosaically, and become a widow. The other should have become a whore, and all that ; ‘ guilty splendour ’. Both are overtaken by age, not too rich, a nuisance to themselves and to others. . . . I saw the whole work quite clearly, and hope to do it.

He must have pondered that story for several years ; and as his imagination worked on the material it changed the story from a short one to a very long one, warmed it, gave it colour and humour and great kindness. Nothing in the book was written ‘ rather cruelly ’. The sisters did not become a nuisance to themselves and to others. The less prosaic of them kept her virtue. And neither the restaurant nor the infancy figured in *The Old Wives’ Tale*. But, above all, imagination told Bennett to set the book’s main scene in the heart of Staffordshire, the heart of England. This was the making of it, because when Bennett stepped away from the Potteries, which he knew with the freshness of a boy’s insight and the emotional richness of unsophistication, his work lost some of its peculiar enchantment. *The Old Wives’ Tale* began and ended in the Five Towns. It embraced the history of the Five Towns as well as that of two sisters who grew old together. Its pictures of youth and old age are very moving indeed ; so excellent that we find

them heightened in quality by the book's once greatly admired central portion, which is more superficial and perhaps more timid, describing the second sister's Parisian life.

Not the infancy of the sisters, but their girlhood, opens *The Old Wives' Tale* and gives it immediate life :

Those two girls, Constance and Sophia Baines, paid no heed to the manifold interest of their situation, of which, indeed, they had never been conscious. They were, for example, established almost precisely on the fifty-third parallel of latitude. A little way to the north of them, in the creases of a hill famous for its religious orgies, rose the river Trent, the calm and characteristic stream of middle England. Somewhat further northwards, in the near neighbourhood of the highest public-house in the realm, rose two lesser rivers, the Dane and the Dove, which, quarrelling in early infancy, turned their backs on each other, and, the one by favour of the Weaver and the other by favour of the Trent, watered between them the whole width of England, and poured themselves respectively into the Irish Sea and the German Ocean. What a county of modest, unnoticed rivers ! What a natural, simple county, content to fix its boundaries by these tortuous island brooks, with their comfortable names—Trent, Mease, Dove, Tern, Dane, Mees, Stour, Tame and even hasty Severn ! Not that the Severn is suitable to the county ! In the county excess is deprecated. The county is happy in not exciting remark. It is content that Shropshire should possess that swollen bump, the Wrekin, and that the exaggerated wildness of the Peak should lie over its border. It does not desire to be a pancake like Cheshire. It has everything that England has, including thirty miles of Watling Street ; and England can show nothing more beautiful and nothing uglier than the works of nature and the works of man to be seen within the limits of the county. It is England in little, lost in the midst of England, unsung by searchers after the extreme, but how proud in the instinctive cognizance of its representative features and traits !

Fifty pages later, when Mr. Baines, dying, has forbidden Sophia to become a teacher, and she is unwell with agitation, their mother waits upon the two girls, to give Sophia a dose of quite superfluous castor-oil :

'I don't want any, Mother,' said Sophia, in dejection. 'I'm quite well.'

'You simply ate nothing all day yesterday,' said Mrs. Baines. And she added, 'Come !' As if to say, 'There's always this silly fuss with castor-oil. Don't keep me waiting.'

'I don't *want* any,' said Sophia, irritated and captious.

The two girls lay side by side, on their backs. They seemed very thin and fragile in comparison with the solidity of their mother. Constance wisely held her peace.

Mrs. Baines put her lips together, meaning : 'This is becoming tedious. I shall have to be angry in another moment.'

'Come !' said she again.

The girls could hear her foot tapping on the floor.

'I really don't want it, Mamma,' Sophia fought. 'I suppose I ought to know whether I need it or not !' This was insolence.

'Sophia, will you take this medicine, or won't you ?'

In conflicts with her children, the mother's ultimatum always took the formula in which this phrase was cast. The girls knew, when things had arrived at the pitch of 'or won't you', spoken in Mrs. Baines's firmest tone, that the end was upon them. Never had the ultimatum failed.

There was a silence.

'And I'll thank you to mind your manners,' Mrs. Baines added.

'I won't take it,' said Sophia, sullenly and flatly ; and she hid her face in the pillow.

It was a historic moment in the family life. Mrs. Baines thought the last day had come. But still she held herself in dignity while the apocalypse roared in her ears.

'*Of course I can't force you to take it,*' she said with superb evenness, masking anger by compassionate grief. 'You're a big girl and a naughty girl. And if you will be ill you must.'

Upon this immense admission, Mrs. Baines departed.

Constance trembled.

Sophia is the rebel ; but it is Constance who has the endurance to make her life in the Five Towns and, at the end of the book, to survive her sister for a little while. And at the end of her days

Constance never pitied herself. She did not consider that Fate had treated her very badly. She was not very discontented

with herself. . . . True, she was old ! So were thousands of other people in Bursley. She was in pain. So there were thousands of other people. With whom would she be willing to exchange lots ? She had many dissatisfactions. But she rose superior to them. When she surveyed her life, and life in general, she would think, with a sort of tart but not sour cheerfulness : ‘ *Well, that is what life is !* ’

Nobody in England had written such a book as *The Old Wives’ Tale* in such a way. It had not the exuberance of Dickens ; nor the ironic sentiment of Thackeray. It was less brilliant than Meredith and less nobly tragic than Hardy. But, on the other hand, it had a warmth and kindness quite foreign to any realists known to the English public. It was praised and loved ; and was thereafter the touchstone by which all Bennett’s work was judged.

I have written, he once admitted, between seventy and eighty books. But also I have only written four : *The Old Wives’ Tale*, *The Card*, *Clayhanger*, and *Riceman Steps*. All the others are made a reproach to me because they are neither *The Old Wives’ Tale*, nor *The Card*, nor *Clayhanger*, nor *Riceman Steps*.

It was from *The Old Wives’ Tale* that he never escaped.

However, his reputation was made in 1908, and he continued to behave, with his pen, as if he were still the unknown young man of 1900 who could produce sensational serials, ‘ frolics ’ (such as *A Great Man* and *The Card*), short stories, articles, and plays, without anybody sharply calling him to order for frivolity. Censors were soon aroused. But what these censors did not realize was that, while in Paris, Bennett had allowed industry to become a disease, and that, unlike those who think one should not begin to write any book which is to be less than a masterpiece, Bennett had the old-fashioned habit of writing for fun. It was said that he wrote exclusively for profit. That was not so. When he was writing a serious book—such, for example, as *Clayhanger*—he took the work with the utmost seriousness. What he could not take seriously was the suggestion that it was the duty of genius to be always

serious. In spite of his air of assurance and self-complacency, he was too modest and humorous to be 'great'. He left such solemnities to the sterile.

Of those other books by which Bennett claimed that he was judged, he wrote *The Card*, an extravaganza portraying a typical Five Towns adventurer, while on holiday in Switzerland in 1909. *Clayhanger* was the first volume of an ambitious trilogy intended to trace the parallel lives of a man and a woman from youth to marriage and from marriage to old age. Its sequels were *Hilda Lessways* (1911) and *These Twain* (1916); and I believe it was conceived as a companion piece to *The Old Wives' Tale*. The circumstances of its composition, however, wrecked the design, which as the books now exist is mechanical. Whereas *The Old Wives' Tale* had been written quietly at Fontainebleau, in hope, upon a theme long considered, with fame yet distant, these other books were interrupted by illness, success, the knowledge of expectations which had been formed by a public such as he had not hitherto dreamed of, and at last by international convulsion.

Clayhanger itself, with fine pictures of the constraints and spiritual adventures of young life in the Potteries, and the sober portraiture of a boy growing up under the tyranny of his father, is extraordinarily fine. It creates a domestic scene of poignant interest; and young Edwin Clayhanger's glimpses of Hilda Lessways as a mysterious and tantalizing creature are beautiful. The book is a supreme representation of youth. Its sequel, *Hilda Lessways*, has less vital interest. Since it is made, deliberately, to reproduce some of the romantic incidents from *Clayhanger*, but from Hilda's point of view, and always with inferior magic, it lacks freshness and at times seems to resemble a key to the preceding entertainment. The trilogy as a whole might then have been wrecked, because the concluding volume, *These Twain*, had made little progress when the first world war distracted the author's mind and immersed him in quite another kind of activity.

I have always believed that this first of the overwhelming wars of our time destroyed Bennett's confidence in the importance of his own work. He still continued doggedly to produce *These Twain* in the midst of every other activity and in spite of every other demand upon his strength ; but the strength was impaired and the belief that novel-writing was an occupation worthy of man was shaken. His sensitiveness was highly abnormal ; the characteristics of modern warfare horrified him ; his old rigid Methodism was deeply shocked by the avid sensationalism of a kind of society which he now entered for the first time. He remembered, of course, that he belonged to the North, and that he must continue to be ' outwardly brusque, stoical, undemonstrative, scornful of the impulsive ', and he wrote journalism the object of which was to sustain the civilian population of Great Britain. He worked at the Ministry of Information ; he met and corresponded with the war leaders in both England and France. His correspondence, indeed, was immense, and his influence and public reputation were both at their highest point. But he was not happy, and it was never again his ambition to write such a book as *The Old Wives' Tale*. The book he produced amid this stress, *These Twain*, contains some of his very finest work, some superb scenes from provincial life, the most powerful and truthful picture ever painted in England of the conflict of wills in inharmonious marriage. Nevertheless the most significant words in the book are those describing Edwin Clayhanger's ' terrible gloom which questioned the justification of all life ' ; and the most revealing books Bennett ever wrote—both of them under-rated in his lifetime and since—are *The Pretty Lady* and *Lord Raingo*, in which he resolutely expresses his horror of the levity or the chicane of those whom he saw closely in wartime.

I said that Bennett wrote wartime journalism. He had been a journalist all his life. From the time when, as a boy, he supplied little paragraphs to the Hanley newspaper, and, as sub-editor and editor of *Woman*, gossip and advice to his

readers, and critical reviews to the *Academy*, short homilies (afterwards reprinted in book form under self-help titles such as 'How to Live on Twenty-four Hours a Day' and 'Mental Efficiency') to *T.P.'s Weekly*, and occasional contributions to many other newspapers, to the time when he made all London talk of his brilliant causeries about books (collected in *Books and Persons*) in *The New Age*, he was in constant action. Then, during the 1914-18 war, he was found in the *Daily News*; and at last, until his death, he wrote for the *Evening Standard* the most highly paid book reviews in England. He was a writer. After his death, strangers were astonished to learn that in addition to all his published work he had kept copious daily Journals for the previous thirty-five years.

But he was not therefore a journalist when he wrote novels; and it is upon his novels that Bennett's ultimate reputation as a writer will depend. The novels, as I have indicated, belong to three orders; the realistic studies of men and women in their appropriate environment, the sensational or extravagant presentations of men and women in environments wholly fantastic, the humorous—some say facetious—comedies of character and circumstance of which *The Card* is the best example, although *Buried Alive*, the book on which his play *The Great Adventure* is based, has many delights. In every case the best of his novels has its main scene in the Potteries. This is true of *The Card* as of *The Old Wives' Tale* and *Clayhanger* and *These Twain* and *Whom God Hath Joined*. It was the life of his boyhood which gave confidence, fun, insight, and profundity to such work. He was the historian of Staffordshire. He was himself, in something the same degree as Dr. Johnson, the epitome of Staffordshire, and therefore a most interesting illustration of English character.

In person he was of the middle height—five feet ten inches—and except for one period during the first world war, when he put on flesh and was caricatured as a fat man with a quif of hair, a fob and a pompous manner, was

slightly built. One shoulder was always held, stiffly, rather above the other, and he walked slowly and very erect. His stammer I have described ; it was not a stutter, but a complete, rocking inability to produce the word he eventually, by force of will, uttered. This stammer communicated itself to some of his work, and made it seem unnecessarily abrupt. His natural humour was without self-consciousness, and never caused him to speak unkindly. When he was harsh, it was towards scoundrelism : he would say of a rogue ' He . . . is a bad man '. He could and did talk very well in congenial company ; otherwise he remained silent. What he thought, he wrote. He was a writer.

If you have noted the difference between the paragraph with which he began *The Old Wives' Tale* and the paragraph describing the neighbourhood of Hanley which I quoted from *Anna of the Five Towns*, you will have seen that when once Bennett had assumed his natural style he was not afraid to allow humour to colour his most realistic work. He was still afraid of humour when he wrote the best of his early serious tales, *Whom God Hath Joined* ; but by the time he came to *The Old Wives' Tale* he was entirely at ease with his own method. The humour was humane ; he really liked men and women. It was one of his dogmatic remarks that nine out of ten of them improved on acquaintance ; and he was so well acquainted with the people in his novels that, from Mr. Povey to Denry Machin, and Edwin Clayhanger to Auntie Hamps, they are seen with, as it were, improved comprehension. They are our friends ; but not inconveniently our friends.

When he let his humour drop, and became very serious (or very French), as in *Sacred and Profane Love* or *The Glimpse*, the result was hard, superficial, and incredible. When he gave it rein, as in *A Great Man*, *Buried Alive*, *The Card*, *The Regent*, or *Mr. Prohack*, it was sometimes triumphant but sometimes, if the liveliness of composition had faded, less irresistible than it might have been. In *The Regent* it had

lost all liveliness and become jocularity. When he carried it into adventure stories, such as *The Grand Babylon Hotel*, *Hugo*, and other, less successful, tales, it often robbed the adventures of danger. In plays it was almost always extremely effective in the theatre ; such plays as *What the Public Wants*, *The Title*, *The Great Adventure* were all delightful entertainment. No more than that. They represented the easiest of fun for Bennett. He did not attach the smallest importance to them, or to the more uniformly successful play in which he collaborated with Edward Knoblock, *Milestones*.

It was, however, the union of humour with resolute truthfulness which gave Bennett his distinction. He would lie in fun, and with extravagance ; but the prime quality in his most ambitious writing is its integrity. There is no falsification. Those who suppose that he compromised, or wrote for money or popularity, do not understand that he was—what they are not—tolerant of defects in mankind. He was not tolerant of the petty vices of deceit, treachery, spitefulness, and censoriousness. For those he felt contempt. But he was tolerant of the faults of character. When he said, early in his life, that the characteristic of a great novelist should be a Christ-like compassion, he spoke for his whole history as a man and a writer. He could laugh—at, for example, the foibles of dwellers in the Five Towns—but he did not laugh cruelly. No less cruel man ever lived. And that freedom from cruelty in its every form, from bad conscience and from hatred and jealousy, is to be read in all his novels. All are humane.

The faults of his work, which, as in the case of all great, unequal writers, are many, can be briefly indicated. He wrote at several levels. He was, being a Staffordshire man, either incapable of showing passion or of feeling it ; I think the latter. He could be grim, sardonic, accusing ; but he had learned as a boy to be stoical and I believe that, for all the virtues of restraint in literature, he could with advantage have been more emotional. When he tried to express an

abandonment to emotion, as in *Sacred and Profane Love*, he failed. The weakest part of *The Pretty Lady* is the part relating to the lady's emotions. The weakest part of *The Old Wives' Tale* is the part in which Sophia ceases to belong to the Five Towns. And, finally, in his plays, his lesser books, and even in the *Clayhanger* trilogy, there is a meagreness or carelessness of design. I think this also arose from his Staffordshire upbringing ; a mistrust of the grandiose, of, in fact, the tragic. 'In the county excess is deprecated.' For him, the nearest approach to tragedy is the pathos of old age. That pathos runs through all his books ; but there is nothing in them of tragedy. His attitude is that of Constance, in *The Old Wives' Tale*, 'Well, that is what life is'. He would probably have insisted that life is not tragic, or that in literature tragedy is a manipulation of circumstance.

Within his range, however, which he perfectly understood and commanded, Bennett has a mastery not approached by any other realistic novelist of our age. His characters are there as people ; they are there as types of the Potteries and as illustrations of the endless foibles and endurances of mankind. They live in time and space. We see them and hear them, often by means of such small typical tricks of expression as are shown in the conversation I quoted between Mrs. Baines and Sophia. We see their shops and their bedrooms, their dogs, their mannerisms ; but these things are not offered to us for their mere veracity, since each detail contributes to our knowledge of these and all people, to this way of life and all English ways of life. Bennett's novels will live, indeed, because future generations will see and feel in them the actual life of one part of England in a day that is already past. His scene is Staffordshire ; but Staffordshire men think themselves the quintessence of the English spirit. If they are right, as I fancy they may be, Bennett expresses that spirit.

ARNOLD BENNETT

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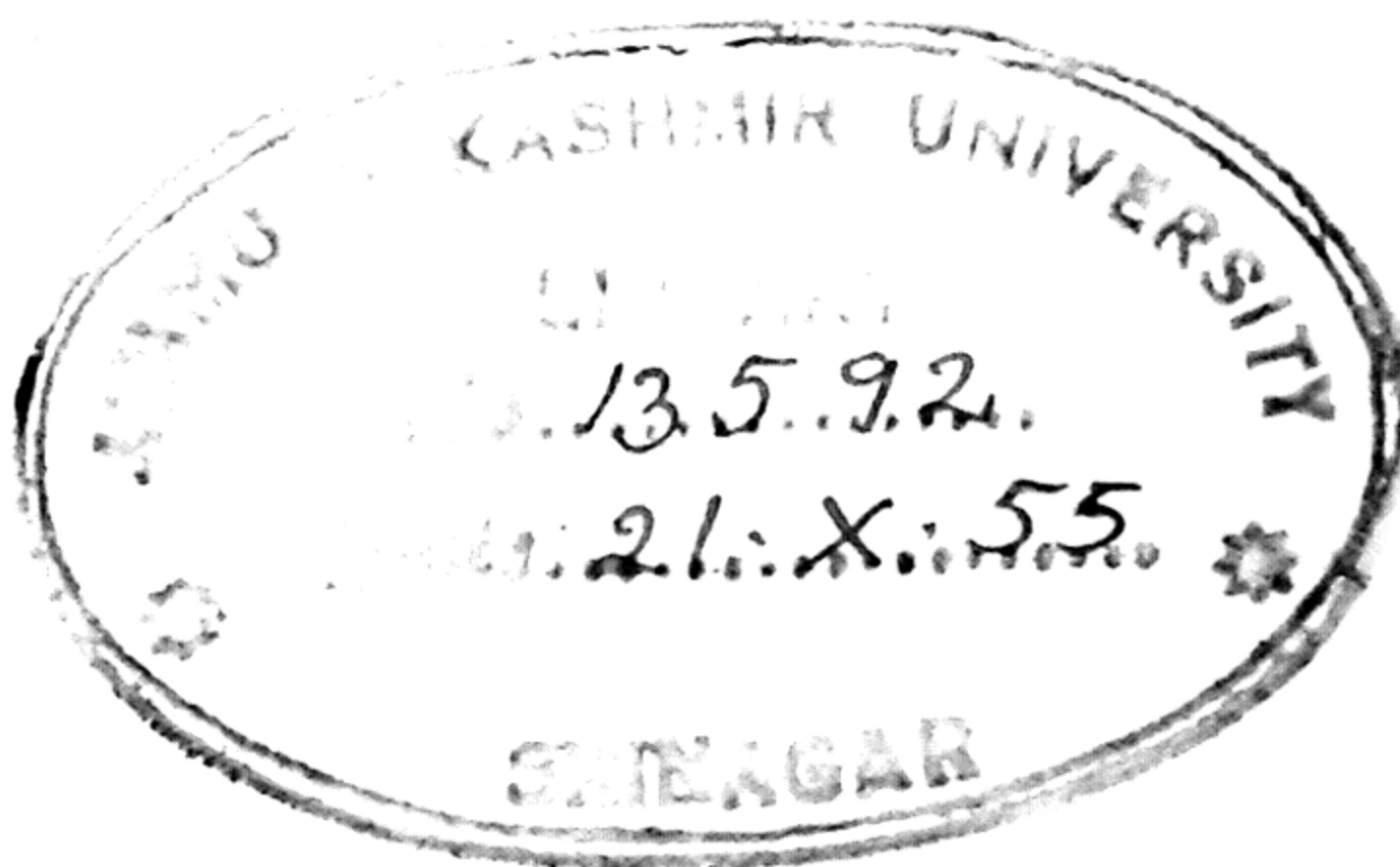
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